Wallinger’s works do not, it seems to me, describe anything. What they do is dig up a buried layer of the English unconscious which has successfully resisted analysis.

The relative blankness of this layer may be connected to an earlier expulsion from the English unconscious of the mother figure, as suggested above, and of other mythic and imaginary materials. And these expulsions may have created room for older human identifications with an animal group to start to come through. But although there is something unmistakeably English about the blank Wallinger produces, it is difficult to say anything about what makes it specifically English. If you compare, say, Royal Ascot with similar material from elsewhere, with, for example, the mock-majestic ride-by in his carriage of the Lord Lieutenant and Earl of Dudley, Sir William Humble, on the last three pages of Chapter 11 of James Joyce’s Ulysses, or compare it with the whole of Claude Simon’s great horse-owning-riding-jockeying-fucking-racing novel, La Route des Flandres of 1960, there seems to be no way of explicitly saying what fundamentally distinguishes them from each other... other than to say that they are English, Irish and French. What was used to distinguish Wallinger’s works above — human identifications with an animal group — is also central in Claude Simon, and so cannot tell you about what is English in Wallinger. The differences are tangible, just not necessarily describable.

Wallinger is not the only contemporary English artist working between the new and the very old indeed. So much of the life in English art is to be found there. What Wallinger has found has yet to be broken in. Artists take risks.

‘Mark Wallinger’ was shown at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 25 February-1 April, and at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 10 May-11 June, 1995.


Johannesburg Biennale
Interview with Lorna Ferguson
Bernd Scherer

Bernd Scherer: We have had a biennial in Havana, a biennial in São Paulo, in Sydney and, of course, the old city in the north, Venice. Why do we need a biennial in Johannesburg in South Africa?

Lorna Ferguson: I think that there are two answers to that question. There is a South African answer and there is a broader, international reason. The South African reason involves our recent history of having gone through a double decade of international academic and cultural boycott. After democratic elections it became an absolute imperative to reintegrate into the cultural arena as soon and effectively as possible. The cultural boycott (a double-edged sword in a sense) certainly was beneficial in some ways because it forced South Africans to assess our multicultural situation as a positive impetus to develop our art, but towards the end South African art was becoming stultified. We had no wider stimulus from Africa and we were largely cut off from developments in the art scene in Europe and America; so it became extremely important to attempt to rejoin the international cultural fraternity. The Johannesburg Biennale was the most efficient vehicle to invite foreign artists and curators to South Africa, not only to show our own art but also to ‘kick-start’ a network with important makers and thinkers in other countries.

Concerning the international context, if you mention the Havana Biennial, or São Paulo, Sydney, Venice — there is no major biennial, in the sense that we are using the word — in Africa. I’ve been to both the new Dakar and the Abidjan Biennials and the concept of artists exhibiting and responding to certain thematic proposals appeared not to be important to the organisers. It seemed also, although I stand to be corrected, that artists could apply for exhibition space in order to take part. Consequently, it seems that there is room in Africa to offer an international biennial to artists and curators that is not exclusively First World in context but investigates the current unfolding of
artistic production from a developing world perspective as well. This was an important aspect of the exhibition because it has given great impetus to what is going on in South Africa at the moment. It must be stressed that the Johannesburg Biennale was seen by us as a reciprocal cultural exchange — we couldn’t enter a process where it could be perceived that we would be re-colonised intellectually or theoretically. We feel strongly that we have something valuable to offer.

BS: According to what you say, there is a way of working from a northern hemisphere perspective as well as from a southern one, and ‘northern art’ is quite often chosen by professional curators. Did you see a difference in the criteria used by the ‘northern’ curators and the art that they chose and those of the ‘southern’ curators?

LF: Yes, in the sense that you describe, a noticeable difference, if one is to generalise. The ‘northern’ curators with whom we negotiated exhibitions insisted on some kind of theoretical structure from us on which to lean and base their thinking — this was very strong and obvious; but these same kinds of questions were not asked by the curators from the developing countries. There was a much more intuitive and more inexperienced response. But the Johannesburg Biennale...

BS: Inexperienced?

LF: Inexperienced. For example, African artists have traditionally been curated from Europe or the US by non-Africans. This Biennale I think is significant in that it embraced self-representation as a very positive element of the model. In principle we were trying to encourage curators from each country to put together exhibitions which not only responded to the Biennale themes, but also, if they had taken part in the Foreign Curators’ Forum and tour a year previously, to respond by designing an exhibition which would best contribute to a dialogue with the contemporary South African art community. We had no separate central or core exhibition which was curated to illustrate a theoretical stance. The foreign participation and the South African exhibitions were seen to be the Biennale. So we had to begin to help create an African network of curators for this to happen, curators for whom, in many cases, international engagement was a new experience, and so I referred to this as inexperience.

BS: Before we come to this concept of curatorship and the training of curators, you said that the African ones were less experienced. Did this have different results as far as the exhibitions were concerned?

also Benin. The importance of a Biennale like ours was that it set up a fairly easy space, not only for artists but also for curators to work together, interact, exchange and assist each other if necessary.

BS: You have described your concept of curatorship as ‘soft’ curatorship. Can you explain this concept?

LF: ‘Soft’ curatorship was actually a term which Bruce Ferguson coined at a conference in São Paulo in October, 1994, when I was describing the principle upon which we were designing our Biennale. I think it is a fairly easy idea to understand. ‘Hard’ curatorship would involve choosing the artists and the specific works to be presented. ‘Soft’ curatorship is a process more suited to the South African condition at the moment where huge store is placed on negotiation and the consultative process. ‘Soft’ curatorship is curation through consultation. The South African funded exhibitions, for example, came about through advertising for proposals in a national newspaper and submitting the replies to a very large committee of 35 representatives from all sectors of the visual art community and the staff. Then, because Community Art Centre proposals and works by rural artists were seen to be a priority, Bongi Dhlomo (who worked as the Outreach and Development Coordinator) assisted in the negotiation and realisation of 11 exhibitions from these artists who are frequently overlooked because they ordinarily do not respond to formal calls for projects which require written budgets and competitive conceptualising. The South African curators were delegated full responsibility for their exhibitions after being allocated their funding and given the option of consulting with the Biennale staff if they wished to.

‘Soft’ curatorship with regard to the international curators meant engaging with them in extensive consultation about the Biennale themes and the inclusion of one or several South African artists in their curatorial proposals, because we invited them to do this. This was usually done with me but we were also running a young ‘trainee curator’ programme and most of the trainees handled this consultation with their international curators on our behalf.
BS: Would you say that this concept of ‘soft’ curatorship was successful or did it have serious drawbacks?

LF: I personally believe that it was successful, although there was certainly some criticism of the process not being consultative enough within South Africa. Some of the foreign curators, however, found it to be an extremely exciting procedure and several were able to make more than one trip to South Africa because they took their brief very seriously. Tony Bond from Australia has described the process at a conference in Perth, as the most consultative Biennale that has ever taken place.

I am reluctant to describe the immense administrative difficulties we experienced, particularly after our extended isolation, as drawbacks. We had 64 foreign countries participating and at one early stage I was dealing in different ways with curators and representatives in over a hundred countries. Unfamiliarity with language, time differences, bureaucracies and the frustrations of conversing on varyingly sophisticated international communication networks are, I imagine, par for the course in the organisation of any large international exhibition.

In terms of communicating effectively what we were trying to achieve from a curatorial perspective, with the enormously different understandings of the foreign curators and artists, I admit that at times this was very complicated.

BS: Is it possible with such a concept of the role of a curator, to develop a convincing concept for an exhibition?

LF: It depends what one is trying to achieve. You must remember that the exhibition model for the Johannesburg Biennale was essentially a political one. Our intention was avowedly one of self-representation, with notions of identity obviously arising in response to our themes. Therefore, to expect an overriding, convincing coherence within the Biennale as a whole would have been tantamount to undermining the essential differences which were bound to, in fact were expected to manifest themselves.

Also, it seems to me that tight control of the conceptual coherence of large international exhibitions (where selection of curatorial and artistic representation is very often beyond the jurisdiction of the artistic director), means that the ‘convincing concept’ to which you refer might be a Eurocentric ideal but nevertheless a pipe dream. The mechanisms for accessing international funding for foreign participation usually mean that the Ministries of Culture or the funding bodies rather like to parade their best ‘product’, almost like a nationalistic flag waving contest. Our challenge was to work with appointed curators or

Roger Meintjes (Portugal), Sample Collection, 1994, photographic installation. Photo: Andrew Meintjes.
ones that we recommended (who became known to us as flexible enough to enjoy working in this way) and attempt to convey our concept to them, allowing and welcoming different perceptions. This was an important part of our concept. But then, I think it is also important to acknowledge that in some senses it was an extremely uncompromising version of one approach to curating an exhibition. Perhaps it never has to be repeated unless the intentions are to pursue the same objectives that we did. It is certainly not the model for a curator who wishes to investigate a particular theoretical concept which demands tight control. We delegated that control as a conscious process of the exhibition and took an enormous leap of faith so that we could invite as many revelations as possible and I believe that it paid off.

BS: Did the training of the young South African curators, all of whom travelled overseas to work with their international curators from the north, not lead to an imposition of ‘northern’ concepts of aesthetics? Are there examples where the ‘northern’ experts learnt from their southern trainees?

LF: Not all of the international curators were from the north; Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand both offered sponsorships; but it was a regret that we were not able, in the end, to place any of the trainees in Africa, Latin America or Asia.

It must obviously be true but it is difficult to comment on the imposition of ‘northern’ concepts of aesthetics on the trainees because they were being incorporated as guests into the organisation of ‘northern’ exhibitions. But the Spanish and French exhibitions were two examples of attempts to make something else happen. Tumelo Mosaka and Clive Kellner were very competent trainees and Octavio Zaya and Jean-Hubert Martin delegated most of the responsibility to these trainees of choosing South African artists for inclusion into their shows. Neither show was then ‘northern’ and 44 South African photographers and artists were integrated into the presentation of these two exhibitions alone.

The Belgian exhibition, curated by Bart de Baere, is certainly one that I have often spoken about although not in relation to trainee curator influence. It is worth mentioning, however, because it was a particularly interesting instance of a curator who was really committed to the process of investigating the potential dynamism and problems of placing artists from radically different cultural background into one exhibition. The two Flemish artists arrived in South Africa and immediately went to stay for 10 days with Albert Munyai, an artist from Venda, which is a northern rural area near the borders of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. They returned together and made most of their work in situ in the Museum Africa in Johannesburg. Although I was not that familiar with either Honore d’O or Rick Moens’ oeuvre before their arrival, I was struck by their collaborative procedure (together with Munyai) and they still claim that the experience radically changed their perceptions and their art. Albert Munyai, who is a very robust wood carver, ventured into making a most lyrical work, using fabric and small sculptures. I confess to feelings of euphoria watching this.

BS: On the basis of the Biennale, would you argue that there are different concepts of aesthetics which vary from culture to culture?

LF: The answer to that must be yes, but this is a very difficult question because exhibitions like ours immediately raise questions which go beyond aesthetics. They include discussions on the different relations of cultural power — the power relations which exist within cultures and also between cultures. Art history has validated certain cultural objects and not others and this is reflected most clearly in the art market. So, as it cannot be argued that there is a universal standard by which we can evaluate art globally, the mixing of different cultures within one curatorial proposal was a very difficult exercise to manage for many of the foreign and also the South African curators. We arranged the geography of the full exhibition only after we were fairly certain what works of art or installations most of the curators were planning. It was important to play off the different aesthetics against each other without suggesting a hierarchy.

BS: You also included folk art in the exhibition. Why did you do this and did this approach work out? Would you argue that the distinction between art and folk art has to be discarded, especially in an African context?

LF: I know I put forward that argument at the symposium because I said that categories like folk art were not useful in an African context. Folk art is regarded pejoratively in what you have termed ‘northern’ aesthetics. In considering the various statuses of contemporary South African art we could not simply dismiss the work of artists with no formal education or art which was utilitarian, had a certain tendency of repetitive production, or was made with material which had no real value in the First World (to mention only a few of the ways that folk art is interpreted). In South Africa we have become particularly sensitive about trying to question perceptions which disadvantage some
of our artists, so it was an important factor in our presentation to curators to suggest that categories like folk art needed to be challenged.

I was startled, however, by the facility with which some of the ‘northern’ delegates to the symposium classified images (which I showed on slide) as folk art. The work of Ramouald Hazoume from Benin begins with folk art forms because his departure point is with a west African masking tradition, using materials that he terms ‘colonial junk’ — plastic bottles, broken television sets, brushes (in fact anything that comes to hand which he finds evocative) — to make ironic parodies of and for the European demand for African exotica. He has certainly moved well beyond any easy classification of folk art and this needs to be acknowledged. It is important to find new categories and the Johannesburg Biennale offered itself as a vehicle to do this.

BS: Did you see new trends in your Biennale, and if so was the Biennale successful in promoting them?

LF: This is a difficult question to answer because so much of what we saw was new for us after being isolated for so long. Some of the elements of our model, for example the inclusion of the work of urban Community Art Centre and rural artists in an international exhibition, may develop as new trends if included in other exhibitions on the geographical margins. We certainly did promote as much as we could afford to. Not everyone was receptive to some of our ‘innovations’ but then perhaps they could not be seen to be relevant everywhere.